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Work of the Austrian Province in Turkey

Many different views about changes in Turkey can be heard today. In my short statement I want to say a few words about the present situation of the country. Then I would like to point out what the Austrian Province is doing there and add finally a few personal comments.

1. Present reality

Turkey is a country of 65 million inhabitants of which only maybe less than 150.000 – two per thousand – are Christians. More than 99% are Moslems, but it is not an Islamic state, as the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, tried to build up a secular westernized community. He abolished many forms holy to Islam, starting with the Sharia, and more or less put religion into the private sphere. While in the Arabic world a lot happened in context with religion and nation in the first decades of this century, Atatürk put something like a large layer of ice on the religious life of his country. Islam was removed from public life, but the countryside remained religious. With the development of democracy, however, religion became an important tool for different parties in order to attract voters. A lot of slow changes happened since the Fifties, some of them specifically after 1980, when the ruling military felt that a stronger stress on values of religion and ethics might help to overcome the bloody struggle between left and right of that time.

As a consequence the Islamic influence in different public fields like education and justice became more and more visible, and thus in the last years the defenders of Atatürk's reforms, led by the military, have been trying to undo what had slowly developed in four decades. The term 'Clash of Cultures' could be used, but not in the way Huntington does it, as it is not a clash between the western world and the Islamic world, but an inside conflict: Turks themselves are struggling for the answer if their country should belong to the western or the Islamic civilization. We are in the middle of that struggle now and specifically our education work is deeply involved in that question.

So far a short very simplified summary has been developed that does not touch important questions like European Union, the Kurdish question, or conflicting political visions like Neo-Osmanism (looking back to the greatness of the Ottoman empire) or Pan-Turkism (a vision of a Turkey between the Adriatic sea and the Chinese wall).

2. The Austrian Vincentian family in Turkey

The French Vincentian role in the Near East after the suppression of the Jesuits 200 years ago is well known, but what got the Austrians so strongly involved?

We basically came in like our Philippine confrere today in Beirut – working for the increasing number of German-speaking workers in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Both Austrian and German Vincentians and Daughters of Charity started their apostolate in the framework of the French institution. Since 1891, however, St. George in Istanbul has been a house of the Austrian province. A successful school of confreres and sisters, and an important hospital for the poor developed.

When the work for German-speaking people in Turkey became less important after 1918, and the large Austro-Hungarian province was divided into four parts, provincial superiors wanted to close down that institution. The confreres working in Istanbul convinced them that an apostolate for Turks in that new republic of Atatürk would be important. After the Second World War the number of confreres and sisters in the school dropped radically due to the smallness of our province; we could however get the support of the Austrian government, and presently 50 Austrian teachers are sent and paid by Austria for our school.

The Daughters' province of Graz had to close many houses in Austria as the number of vocations is next to nil, but still sisters are being sent to the hospital in Istanbul and a huge renovation is now taking place with the support both of Graz and Paris. Due to the economic difficulties of the country the number of needy patients – both Turks and foreigners, like Chaldean refugees from Irak, is constantly growing.

Education is presently the battleground between secularists and Islamists in Turkey. In order to take away from Islamists the possibility of influencing younger students the first 8 years of education were unified, and as an indirect consequence since last year we can only take students into high school at the age of 14. This has, of course, serious consequences. We are, however, collaborating closely with an association of our former students, who as Turkish citizens were entitled to open up a new primary school. It started last September.

We are presently 4 Vincentians (3 Austrian, 1 American, of whom 3 are teaching), 4 Daughters of Charity and 2 members of an Austrian secular institute with vows working in the school. Fifteen Daughters work in St. George's hospital.

3. Some personal remarks

Already at the end of my first seminary year I was asked by my provincial if I would be willing to take a teaching degree besides studying theology in order to work later in Istanbul. I agreed and started those studies, but when Fr. James Richardson visited our province in 1970 I asked him if being an English teacher in an Austrian school would really be the proper work for a young Vincentian in the light of our last General Assemblies, when the American confreres moved out of so many educational institutions. I had some questions about 'Evangelizare pauperibus' in an elite school in Turkey where all form of so-called religious propaganda is strictly forbidden. He strongly advised me to go to Istanbul, and thus I went there in 1977. I have been there for 22 years now.

I have become deeply convinced that this is the right place for me. Yves Danjou stressed yesterday the importance of the mystery of the incarnation for St. Vincent's involvement with Islam. This is my Christian basis when I do my administration work as a school principal.

The world of Islam is such complex area that will pose many questions to us in the coming century. Maybe we will be looking for new ways of contact in 10 years, as we are doing it with China presently.

If, out of strange historical circumstances, possibilities – even limited possibilities – do exist, we should not easily give them up. On the contrary, we should look for additional opportunities – I mention only our St. Vincent de Paul Society's work for Christian refugees in Istanbul – and develop them.

That is why we decided in my province that I would stay on in Istanbul when I was appointed Austrian Visitor five years ago. So far it has proved workable, stressing so the importance of the work for Moslems in our tiny province.